



Praying with art

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Encountering modern art

“Why,” asked the exhibition visitor, with some disdain, “don’t artists paint pictures of beautiful things that we can recognise?” She was viewing works from the Methodist Modern Art Collection, billed as depicting aspects of the Christian narrative and experience. What did she expect to find? Pretty pastoral scenes? Photographic representations of bread and wine? A fair-haired, Caucasian Jesus blessing the children and animals?

Instead, she encountered angular abstracts – one of a child being blessed by Jesus; a riot of colour and ambiguous shapes (‘Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem’ by Norman Adams) hung next to sombre aquatints of the crucifixion. And what to make of Dennis Hawkins’ ‘Pentecost 1’ - a painted disc of light on – literally – part of an old school desk?

How might she have been encouraged to stay with what she saw? Or even to pray with what she saw.

‘Looking skills’ are taught to schoolchildren as part of the curriculum (visual literacy is the technical term). But many adults feel ill-equipped to engage with a painting. Their own school experience may even have convinced them they were no good at art.

Confidence in contemplation

Partly in response to this, the trustees of the Collection have published *Creative Spirit*, a visual resource aimed at giving people confidence in contemplation. Taking eight works from the Collection, and a repeated format of ‘Look ... Respond ... Pray’, viewers (or should one say participants) are invited first to gaze and then to identify what they can see.

We are encouraged to think about what the originals of these reproductions might look like. Attention is drawn

to the size and the medium, remembering that the skill of the artist is also in choosing and using textures and colours.

Gentle and open questions are provided to help and stimulate people’s thinking.

Example: The Pool of Bethesda

Reproduced overleaf is the watercolour, ‘The Pool of Bethesda’ (110 cm x 152 cm). It was painted in 1951-1952 by Edward Burra and is one of the most valuable paintings in the Methodist Collection.

- What places, real or imaginary, does the painting remind you of?
- Consider how the artist has used colour.
- What do you think about the way Jesus is portrayed?

The response to these questions doesn’t need to be verbal. They are an invitation to silent prayer as much as to conversation. Or to picking up a paintbrush! “Paint or describe this scene from the viewpoint of the man waiting for healing” is one of the ‘Respond’ challenges.

Daring to pray

Responding to the questions may be engrossing, thoughtful, or perhaps painful, but can become a means of praying for oneself or for another in need of God’s healing touch. The works in the Collection share different visions of the human condition and we are invited to share in a conversation with them.

Edward Burra’s representation of the story in John 5:1-18 is a disturbing one, probably influenced by his own lifelong struggles with ill health. But when the waters of Bethesda’s pool were disturbed healing mysteriously took place. Do we have the courage to place ourselves in this risky territory – of watching and waiting, of

reaching out to God, of receiving what the Holy Spirit prompts in us and grants to us?

One exhibition steward wrote of a young visitor: “He was ‘gobsmacked’ by ‘The Pool of Bethesda’ and told me he had twice been sectioned and that was just what it was like. Burra’s Jesus was his Jesus.”

The headteacher of a school which exhibited the paintings in 2012 noted how staff would visit the exhibition for quiet reflection: “... we were never short of stewards as it was soon appreciated how restorative time spent in the company of such paintings could be”. The same school reported how effectively the chaplain had been able to use the *Creative Spirit* slides in worship, projecting the ‘Look’ questions on a large screen, as well as prayers inspired by the paintings such as:

In the waiting and the watching,
in the longing for healing and the hope of a touch,
at the bedsides of the world.
Loving God, draw close.

Linger with all who hurt and suffer,
that they may know your healing touch
in all its power and mystery.

Linger with all who work and care where sickness is,
that they may know your gentle strength
in all its humility and grace.

So may we embrace chaos
and find hope and life in Christ.

It is worth noting the increasing number of people – not least Methodists – now booking for art-related

retreats. These can take a variety of forms. Some have made use of paintings from the Collection. The Enfield Circuit, who hosted a mini exhibition in Lent, prepared a ‘Chill out!’ sheet for visitors. This included prayers and the encouragement to “Sit for a while ... think about which picture meant the most to you ... why? Wait, relax, and see what God wants to say to you”.

A final invitation

Choose a work of art from the Collection mentioned in this article and practise the spiritual art of attentiveness. See where your observation and meditation take you ... into praise, confession, thanksgiving, intercession? Have some brushes handy, and that may mean your ipad (www.brushesapp.com)! Or perhaps you could paint your response using words.

For discussion

- Sylvia Shaw Judson, a sculptor and author of *The Quiet Eye: a way of looking at pictures* (Aurum Press, 1982), writes in her introduction: “The artist serves humanity by feeding its hungry spirit”. What do you think she means by this?

Going further

Creative Spirit – a study booklet by E Moore, N Thorogood, S Middleton and D Hollingsworth, with DVD and CD of 40 of the works in the Methodist Modern Art Collection (©TMCP 2011) is available from Methodist Publishing at £9.99.

You can view various works of the collection at www.methodist.org.uk/artcollection



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